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Latin America Review

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**Latin America
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*Page***Article****Nicaragua: Sandinista Propaganda and Disinformation Efforts**

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In an effort to influence the US Congress against renewing aid to their insurgent foes, the Sandinistas are intensifying their campaign to discredit the insurgents, portraying the United States as intent on a military solution to Central American problems, and promoting themselves as proponents of regional peace.

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*Articles have been coordinated as appropriate with other offices within CIA.
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Article

**Nicaragua: Sandinista
Propaganda and
Disinformation Efforts**

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During the last six months, the Sandinistas have intensified their propaganda campaign to influence the US Congress in its consideration of whether to renew aid to the anti-Sandinista insurgents. The Nicaraguans have used a variety of techniques, including communiques and leadership travel to generate publicity, use of solidarity organizations, and direct appeals to the Congress. This campaign has highlighted several themes, including discrediting the insurgents, portraying the United States as intent on a military solution to regional problems, and promoting themselves as strong proponents of regional peace and as willing to moderate their domestic policies.

Nicaragua's top leaders have sounded these themes during their foreign travels. President Ortega used his meetings last month with foreign dignitaries attending the Chernenko funeral and the inaugurations of the Presidents of Uruguay and Brazil to seek international backing for the peace initiative he announced at the end of February. In Brasilia, Ortega approached Vice President Bush for a short conversation in an attempt to underscore Nicaraguan willingness to engage in peace talks and embarrass the United States for its refusal to schedule a formal meeting. Sandinista Vice President Ramirez used a trip to the United Kingdom, Ireland, France, and Spain in February to lobby those countries to help in reversing the US decision to suspend the bilateral talks at Manzanillo, Mexico. In addition, Vice Foreign Minister Tinoco came to Washington last month to deliver Nicaragua's offer to allow a bipartisan Congressional delegation to inspect Nicaraguan military bases.

Discrediting the Insurgents

A priority goal of the Sandinista campaign is to discredit the insurgents by accusing them of human rights abuses.

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Although the insurgents have committed some human rights abuses,

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abuses are not as clearcut or widespread as recent press stories and human rights reports contend. In addition, the insurgent leadership has a clear policy against such practices.

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In their public statements, the Sandinistas have emphasized insurgent attacks on civilians, including attacks on vehicular traffic and agricultural cooperatives. Most civilian casualties, however, appear to result from the Sandinista practice of deliberately mixing civilians and military personnel. The cooperatives, for example, generally are defended by militia, and civilians routinely are transported in military vehicles. There is little evidence to support Sandinista charges of mass kidnappings by the insurgents, and the regime may be using such accusations to cover desertions and civilians escaping with the guerrillas.

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In recent months, the regime has attempted to stir outrage by citing statistics on the deaths of children caused by the insurgents. Such charges contrast with the government's policy of deliberately exposing children to danger.

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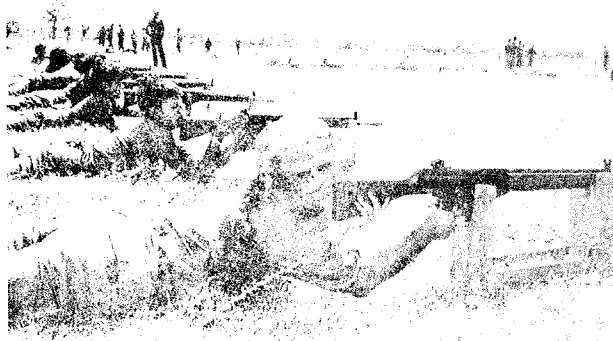
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The Sandinistas emphasize the number of children killed by insurgent attacks, but government policies deliberately expose children to danger. Here, Nicaraguan youths from Managua receive militia training in January.

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uncommon to find 14- and 15-year-olds in the military, and occasionally even younger children serve in the militia or get caught in draft roundups.

children as young as 11 have been recruited.

The Sandinistas clearly have exaggerated the extent of insurgent damage to economic targets. In citing figures up to \$1 billion, the government appears to be using the official—and unrealistic—exchange rate; a free market calculation would cut that figure by at least 80 percent. According to US Embassy calculations of June 1984, the total direct and indirect cost of the insurgency since 1982 was less than \$200 million.

The regime has consistently denigrated the largest insurgent group, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), as dominated by former Somoza National Guardsmen. The charge undoubtedly has hurt the FDN's chances for gaining international support, but the insurgents' ability to attract thousands of peasants and former Sandinista supporters into their ranks suggests that it has not harmed recruiting. Former Guardsmen number only a few hundred of the 15,000 FDN members. Although ex-Guardsmen—none of whom have been accused of violating human rights under Somoza—dominate the general staff, the FDN's claim that the military component is subordinate to the organization's civilian leaders



The Sandinistas claim that some 1,500 insurgents have accepted government amnesty, but the number probably is exaggerated. The government presented one group of more than 100 to the press in February, but at least 27 were militia members trucked in for the ceremony.

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appears to be true.

The Sandinista government also has tried to discredit the insurgents by claiming that significant numbers—some 1,500 in the last two years—have accepted amnesty.

the regime is inflating the success of the program.

some 100 former insurgents, supposedly accepting the government's offer at a press conference in Esteli, included 27 militia members from a rural cooperative who were trucked there by the government.

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Allegations of Assassination Plots

The Sandinistas have long recognized that allegations of US involvement in political assassinations are a politically explosive subject. Nicaragua expelled three US Embassy officers in June 1983 after accusing them of plotting to poison Foreign Minister D'Escoto. In August 1983, the government presented to the press two prisoners allegedly involved in another CIA plot to assassinate several high-ranking officials. The Sandinistas successfully exploited the "CIA guerrilla manual" controversy last fall, and they are likely to raise the issue again in conjunction with the upcoming congressional debate on funding. []

Nicaragua has raised new charges in recent months. In February, Interior Minister Borge said that the FDN was planning to kill rival insurgent leader Eden Pastora—a charge that echoed earlier allegations of US or FDN involvement in a May 1984 assassination attempt against Pastora. Last month, the Sandinistas blocked former opposition presidential candidate Arturo Cruz from returning to Managua to prevent him from publicizing a peace plan supported by both the political opposition and the insurgents. To justify this action, the government charged that it had discovered a CIA plot to assassinate Cruz and make him a political martyr. The Sandinistas also have recently alleged that the United States plans to kill Borge. []

Spurious Charges

The Sandinistas have continued to suggest that the United States has supplied the insurgents with chemical or biological weapons. In March, the Sandinista press repeated the allegations of a visiting Mexican scientist that the insurgents had used "Agent Orange." Last year, a Managua radio station broadcast a Health Ministry warning that the United States might give bacteriological weapons to the insurgents. Although the Ministry told US officials it had not issued such a communique, the report was repeated the next day in *Pravda*. Similarly, a TASS dispatch in April 1984 cited a Nicaraguan radio report in reporting the "confession" of two captured insurgents that the CIA had furnished them with "phosphorous mines" to carry out terrorist attacks. []

Other clear cases of disinformation include the repetition in the Sandinista press last month of charges that anti-Sandinista insurgents were present at US military bases in Panama. In a similar case last June, Managua said 60 "selected Somocista mercenaries" took part in joint US-Honduran exercises. In January, the Sandinistas charged that insurgents planned an aerial attack against Costa Rica using planes with false Sandinista markings. In February, the Sandinista press showed a picture of a dead insurgent with a US Army insignia on his uniform, an obvious plant to suggest continuing US aid to the insurgents. []

Solidarity Efforts

The Sandinistas have continued to seek support in the United Nations and the Nonaligned Movement (NAM). Last month, for example, Vice Foreign Minister Tinoco visited UN Secretary General Perez de Cuellar to publicize a Nicaraguan peace initiative. The Sandinistas recently welcomed a delegation from the "Friends of the Chairman" of the Nonaligned Movement to Managua, a group the regime had lobbied the NAM to form last year to ensure that Nicaraguan issues received priority attention. The Sandinistas probably will appeal to the UN Security Council less frequently now that Nicaragua's two-year term on the Council has ended, but Nicaragua is likely to pursue further action in the UN General Assembly. []

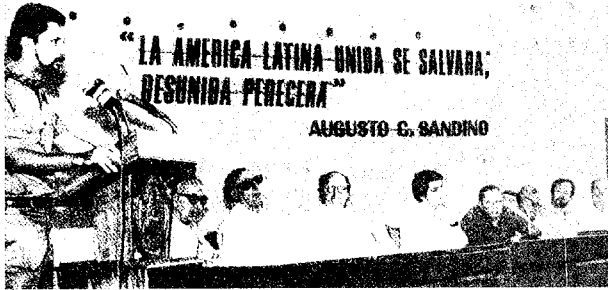
Nicaragua continues to make extensive use of a network of solidarity organizations in Latin America, Europe, and the United States to organize protest marches, peace vigils, and letterwriting campaigns, as well as to make donations and promote trips to []

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Sandinista Directorate member Bayardo Arce addresses the first Latin American Congress on Anti-Imperialist Thought held in Managua in February. Nicaragua has promoted solidarity organizations in Europe, Latin America, and the United States to assist its propaganda efforts.

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Managua has tried to capitalize on vocal support by prestigious figures such as Adolfo Perez Esquivel, a former Nobel Peace Prize laureate. Perez's unsubstantiated allegations last year that Honduran troops had massacred Miskito Indians aided Sandinista propaganda.



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Nicaragua to participate in work brigades. Although these groups generally are small, they receive press attention and tend to create the impression of worldwide sympathy for the regime. Similarly, in February the Sandinistas held the "First Latin American Congress on Anti-Imperialist Thought" in Managua to condemn the United States.

One US group, the Witnesses for Peace, told our Embassy in August that it had brought some 800 US citizens to Nicaragua last year. The group sends its members into zones of conflict to gather information and to serve as a deterrent to insurgent attacks. Although no US citizens have been injured thus far, the Sandinistas have vigorously exploited incidents in which French and West German internationalists have been killed. Pastora's forces say that one of the Germans who was killed on the San Juan River was unarmed and accompanying Sandinista troops.

They have continued to capitalize on vocal support by Peace Prize laureate Adolfo Perez Esquivel. Managua eagerly exploited allegations by Perez early last year that Honduran troops had massacred Miskito Indians. According to US Embassy the killings actually resulted from a Sandinista attempt to repatriate the Indians by force.

Some US Church groups also have provided strong support to the Sandinistas, and foreign clergy play an important role in the pro-Sandinista "popular Church," which has opposed the Nicaraguan Catholic hierarchy. The US Embassy reports, for example, that 12 US priests recently interrupted a meeting of the association representing Catholics in religious orders in Nicaragua and badgered the council into taking a vote on the question of condemning US aggression. An affirmative vote would have contradicted the position of the Nicaraguan bishops, which not only have refused to issue a one-sided condemnation but also have supported the idea of government negotiations with the insurgents.

The Sandinistas undoubtedly view the support of US and West European activists in Nicaragua as an important propaganda asset.

the proregime clergy constitutes only a small

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minority of those serving in the country, but support from abroad and from the government helps give the impression that the "popular Church" is larger. []

Sandinista Flexibility Gestures

The Sandinistas have supported their propaganda campaign with foreign policy and domestic initiatives over the past few months intended to suggest that they are making good faith efforts to resolve US concerns. The regime has not made any fundamental concessions, however, and the gestures are largely intended for their effect in preventing renewal of aid to the insurgents. []

Nicaragua has made important propaganda gains through its unequivocal support for the 7 September Contadora peace treaty draft, a version which heavily favors Sandinista interests. In February, President Ortega announced a new peace initiative to support the Contadora process, including a commitment to withdraw 100 Cuban military advisers, a unilateral moratorium on the acquisition of new weapon systems, and release of an imprisoned Nicaraguan who had been seized from the embassy where he had sought asylum. []

the government's reducing one form of harassment by granting some residency permits to the foreign clergy, and Church sources have told the US Embassy that the Sandinistas are chiefly concerned with securing a statement condemning US aggression. The talks with Rivera have not been fruitful, and there is little indication that the government's autonomy proposal for Atlantic Coast Indians will result in real change. The Sandinistas continue to make some political gains simply by tolerating the continued existence of opposition political parties. Nevertheless, recent interrogations of opposition leaders by State Security has earned the Sandinistas negative publicity. []

The Sandinista government may make additional gestures, such as reducing press censorship, in the next several weeks for propaganda effect. Nevertheless, the draconian media law briefly considered last year indicates that the government is unlikely to institutionalize press guarantees. The regime also may partially relax the state of emergency due to expire on 20 April, although it is certain to blame the insurgents for any restrictions that remain in effect. []

Sandinista Propaganda Effectiveness

Sandinista propaganda and disinformation appears to be generally successful in raising doubts and suspicions about US policy, even when specific accusations strike outside observers as unfounded. Repeated charges of an imminent US invasion, for example, exploit fears that US involvement in Central America could result in a repetition of the Vietnam war. The Sandinistas have been fairly successful in portraying themselves as victims of US intervention, while maintaining a steadfast denial of any involvement in aiding the Salvadoran rebels. Nicaragua's case against the United States in the World Court charges that US actions are illegal under international law. []

At a minimum, the Sandinistas are extremely successful in bringing their message before world public opinion. Few attempts are made in the international media to rebut the charges or demand proof. The Sandinistas are quick to file diplomatic

Domestically, the Sandinistas have publicized a series of meetings with the political opposition, including talks with the Catholic bishops, negotiations with Indian insurgent leader Brooklyn Rivera, and a public debate between President Ortega and private-sector leaders. The Church-state talks have resulted only in

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protests, for example, which are frequently reported by international wire services without evaluation. Government censorship of the Nicaraguan media helps propaganda efforts by stifling criticism and averting refutation of Sandinista positions. [redacted]

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Cuban Efforts Support Nicaragua

Cuban President Castro's "peace offensive," initiated in January, apparently is designed, in large part, to ease US pressure on Nicaragua and influence congressional deliberations on funding for the anti-Sandinistas. Castro is using the media and high-visibility meetings to persuade the American public, US policymakers, and US allies of his desire for a peaceful, negotiated solution in Central America. Seeking to project an image as a pragmatic and moderate leader, Castro in January met with members of the US Bishops Conference visiting Cuba, a US Congressional delegation, and Foreign Ministers from three of the four Contadora countries in Managua. Since those meetings the Cuban leader has held extensive interviews with the *Washington Post*, a Spanish news service, the McNeil-Lehrer Report television program, the CBS Evening News, Spanish and Mexican newspapers, and Swedish television. Although the content of these interviews has been wide ranging, Castro's media blitz and personal diplomacy have focused on his alleged desire to improve relations with the United States and his willingness to negotiate a political solution to the Central American situation. In our opinion, his purpose is to bring public pressure at home and third-party pressure from abroad on Washington policymakers to reduce tensions with Nicaragua. Despite his overtures, however, Castro stated in his conciliatory *Washington Post* interview that, if halting support to regional guerrilla groups is the price of improved relations with the United States, then Cuba is not willing to pay the price. [redacted]

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